



art • music • drama • dance • creative writing

## PARTICIPANT PROFILE

### Denise Smith – A True Believer in Creative Arts



Denise Smith is a 48-year-old Air Force veteran who has received care at the Chillicothe, Ohio VA Medical Center since 1995. Originally from Wheelersburg, Ohio, she credits the VA health care system with ensuring her existence today and enabling her to participate in the 2006 National Veterans Creative Arts Festival in Rapid City, S.D. this October.

Indeed, Smith is a veteran of the Festival itself, having competed nationally 11 times, placing first in her artistic category eight times, and attending the national Festival on several past occasions. It gives her opportunities to get out and socialize, she says, and to make new long-term relationships. According to Smith, it also gives her a fulfilling way of sharing her life-long artistic interests with many new friends.

This year, Smith's award-winning piece, entitled "The Rabbi," was inspired by images of the Holocaust and what she describes as a sad place in her soul. The piece is a form of subtraction art that is created using clay board and India inks, producing an engraved illusion. The piece depicts a lonely older man whose mournful gaze haunts the viewer. "One could interpret the man in my piece as someone who has survived and endured, but his family has not," Smith explains. "There is profound sadness in his eyes."

Despite neurological problems that make pain a constant companion for Smith, she pushes through that pain to create. "There's something magical about creating something," she says. "Even if I'm feeling really badly, when I convince myself to begin a project I become so immersed in the creative process I lose track of time, space and pain."

Smith is afflicted with fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome, conditions which cause widespread musculoskeletal pain in the muscles, ligaments and tendons. Fatigue accompanies the pain and can lead to symptoms of exhaustion. "There are days when I can do more because the pain isn't as intense, and that's when I push myself to work on my pieces," Smith says. "But after those 'good' moments, I am usually wiped out for a few days afterward."

Smith is a true believer in the benefits and goals of the Creative Arts Festival. Despite her own health problems, her personal goal is to create three new pieces of artwork for the annual competition each year. She has experimented with a variety of visual art forms and media, drawing inspiration from events in her life and her deep emotional responses to those events. "Attending the Festival helps me set goals," Smith adds. "The fatigue syndrome limits me, but it helps me work a project all the way through. It gives me focus, and that can be a difficult thing for me to do at times."

Denise Smith strongly recommends creative arts therapy to other VA patients as a means of rehabilitation and a way to improve their lives. "The National Veterans Creative Arts Festival offers the ultimate supportive environment for freedom of expression without fear of judgment," she says. "At the Festival, you are seen as a whole individual with creative expertise."